

Contemporary Projects

9

GAJIN
FUJITA

and

PABLO VARGAS
LUGO

October 27, 2005–February 12, 2006



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This exhibition highlights the work of two young artists, Gajin Fujita (b. 1972, Los Angeles) and Pablo Vargas Lugo (b. 1968, Mexico City), who address notions of cultural and stylistic appropriation in the twenty-first century. By borrowing forms from Asian art as well as contemporary Chicano and Latino graffiti, these artists exemplify, in radically different ways, how artistic traditions are both maintained and altered as they move across stylistic and national borders in two of the largest and most sprawling urban centers in the world.

In Fujita's paintings and drawings, the mixture of Japanese anime, figures derived from traditional Asian woodblock prints, and graffiti results in surprising and evocative works that embody the contradictions of culture and class inherent in urban Los Angeles. Vargas Lugo sidesteps any reference to daily life in Mexico City, as he is more interested in how the passing of time affects our experience of urban geography.

Born in Los Angeles of Japanese parents, Gajin Fujita grew up in Boyle Heights, a predominantly Latino section of East Los Angeles. A member of the graffiti crew K25 (Kill to Succeed), in the 1980s Fujita did numerous "pieces," "taggings," and murals in downtown Los Angeles.[1] His smooth surfaces are the result of a painstaking process. After priming the panels with gesso and polishing them, he covers the surfaces with gold leaf, following traditional Japanese methods. Some of his larger-scale paintings are based on screens with several partitions, a format that he also borrows from Japanese art. Fujita then invites friends from his graffiti crew to tag the shiny surfaces. "The tagging of the paintings is a free-for-all," he says. "It can reflect people's aliases, codes, the crew they belong to, and also encode personal messages." [2] Only a few of the tags survive his subsequent overpainting, but the act itself is charged with meaning: "The tagging has a stigma of destruction, of vandalism, which is obvious. You wouldn't want your own property tagged on. But in a different context you can see the beauty that it holds." By bringing graffiti into the studio, Fujita attempts to lend credence to this form of guerrilla street art, which he views as essentially creative and nonviolent. The tags that cover the gilded surfaces challenge the idea of the artwork as precious object, equating high art with street culture.

Fujita's vibrant paintings are inhabited by fearsome warriors, lusty geishas, and other legendary figures that derive from his interest in Japanese tattoos, screen paintings from the Edo

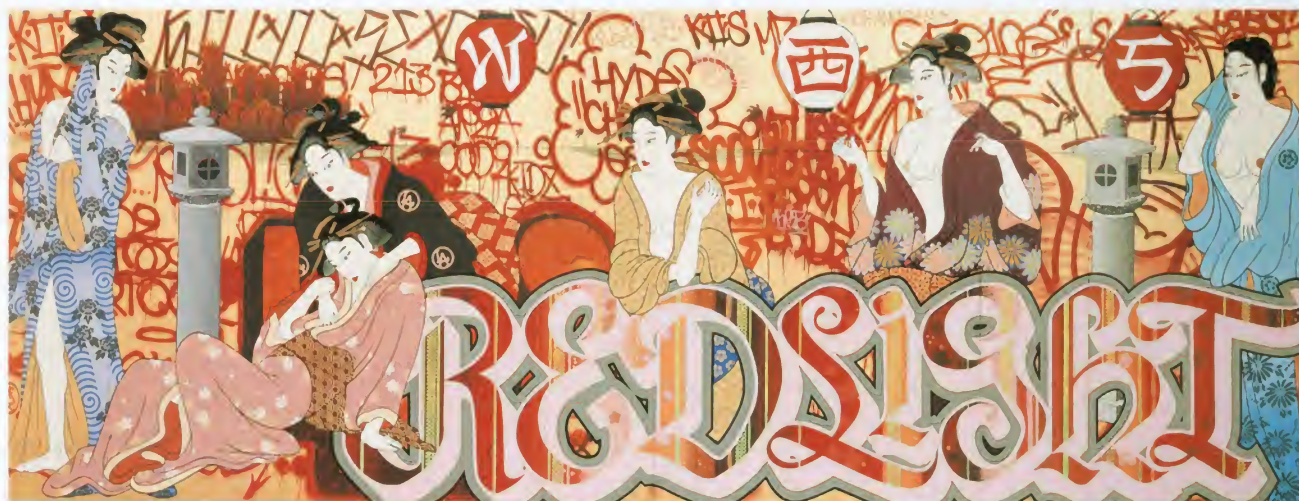


period (1603–1867), *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, and cartoons.[3] The titles of the works, in stylized blocky letters, are linked to gang writing, which claims turf, and also provide a framework for intricate decorative patterns. The two largest paintings in the exhibition, *Red Light District* and *Ride or Die*, are alluring, quasi-apocalyptic dioramas where an imaginary East is inserted within contemporary Los Angeles—the silhouette of the city is an unmistakable marker of place. Erotic geishas and samurais brandishing swords are also seen in other works in the exhibition, including *Baby Doll*, *WS Outlaw*, *Chinita*, and *Street Fight*.

Carp Boy depicts an exotic fish derived from anime. During Boys Day in Japan (May 5th), every family strings *koi* (an ornamental carp) flags on a bamboo stick to represent the number of males in the household. Because of its ability to fight its way up strong streams, the carp is a symbol of the strength and determination to overcome all obstacles, and stands for courage and the ability to attain high goals. Here the carp is placed between a chrysanthemum—the national flower of Japan—and the word "boy" with a star. The striped block letters, an integral part of the work, recall American sports team insignias and advertisements. The American reference is underscored by an ominous view of the city of Los Angeles that lurks in the distance, which could stand metonymically for the word "hood," the title of the work oscillating playfully between "carp boy" and "boys in the hood."

While Fujita's paintings are characterized by a dedication to detail and laborious craftsmanship, his drawings—shown for the first time in this exhibition—are more fortuitous. He begins by projecting images onto pieces of paper, which he traces with pencils and markers, invariably altering the source. He then cuts out the images to make stencils, which are used to create the figures in the paintings. The stencils themselves become the

Pablo Vargas Lugo, *Uprooted Sidewalk* (detail), 2005, metal and cement, 53 1/2 x 92 7/8 x 32 5/8 in. (136 x 236 x 83 cm), © Pablo Vargas Lugo, courtesy Galería OMR, Mexico City



preparatory drawings (or "blueprints of the originals," as Fujita describes them), which present random traces of spray paint and imprints of the triangular weights that he uses to hold the stencils in place. *Study of Warrior from Shoreline Duel*, a dynamic composition that depicts a samurai in action, and *Pink Peony*, a delicate image of an exuberant flower, exemplify the artist's process. He often completes the drawings by adding smaller pieces of paper in a collagelike manner, as in *Study of Green Samurai from Street Fight*.

Pablo Vargas Lugo shares with Fujita an interest in the city and in Asian art. However, instead of depicting specific aspects of urban life or particular Asian sources, he creates images that cannot be precisely placed, subverting the viewer's expectations. Vargas Lugo is part of a generation that emerged in the 1990s and rejected the nationalistic trends of Mexican art. Espousing a more conceptual approach, many of these artists quickly became part of the international art scene.[4] Vargas Lugo works in a variety of media—drawing, sculpture, video, and installation—and uses images as a language while at the same time scrambling its signs.

Uprooted Sidewalk, a pair of sculptures that the artist created expressly for this exhibition, consists of pyramids covered with cracked cement, with yellow borders that recall the sidewalks of Mexico City. Installed as corner pieces, they immediately conjure up the great civilizations of Egypt and Mexico. But the cracked pyramids also allude to the passing of time. As the artist has pointed out, "In Mexico City cracks are important; you learn to live with cracks from earthquakes and also when you walk on sidewalks. They are often totally displaced and become a mass of broken concrete with the roots of trees pushing out... You see something there and you look away, but things continue to grow and shift things around. It is important to me, the way these cracks and these shifts represent time." [5] A sort of visual oxymoron, the pyramids allude to the permanence of culture but also to its fragility. In addition, though conceived as a pair, the

two pieces are not exactly the same size, and they do not sit firmly against the wall. As with nature, culture is imprecise and subject to change.

The idea of urban traces is explored in the video *Raid [sic]*. Rather than tangible city views, the projected images are a series of shadows and lights captured from a moving car. The work is not meant to be a straightforward video projection. Instead, it is conceived as a sculpture, where two screens of slightly different sizes, placed side by side, stand for the driver and the passenger—the abstract projected images representing their separate subjective experiences. According to Vargas Lugo, "The work is related to materials and textures, to the urban roads that we navigate as city dwellers, full of lights and mental residues that give us the idea of moving in a city."

Moon Impression is a series of six light-boxes that depict different impressions of the moon. Their colors and dimensions vary in order to convey different states of the same object, and their random placement subverts notions of hierarchy. The images bring to mind impressionistic renderings of the moon in comic books, their swirling patterns recall Chinese calligraphy, and their shapes could easily be those of lanterns hanging in a Chinatown restaurant. Their location in the exhibition, next to the video, triggers another semiotic possibility—that of different lunar phases illuminating the city. Like the sun, the moon has special significance for many cultures, endowing the work with a mythological aura. But the light-boxes are also simply objects that serve to light up a space. Part of Vargas Lugo's practice entails blurring the boundaries between the exotic and the utilitarian, rendering the visual signs unstable and compelling the viewer to query his own way of seeing the world.[6]

Vargas Lugo began creating his trademark cut paper drawings

Gajin Fujita, *Red Light District*, 2005, spray paint, acrylic, and gold leaf on wood panel, overall dimensions 72 x 192 in. (182.9 x 487.7 cm), © Gajin Fujita, courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, California



Pablo Vargas Lugo, *Skin, Birds, and Stones (V)*, 2005, paper cutout on paper, 39 x 27 1/4 in. (99.1 x 69.2 cm). © Pablo Vargas Lugo, courtesy Galería OMR, Mexico City

in 1994.[7] Their style, lush patterns, and colors recall Asian art. However, as he has noted, "It could almost be said that my drawings speak with an accent. They would really like to be Asian, but they cannot be so even if they try. They are not about being Chinese; they exist on the fringe." [8] For this exhibition, the artist has created a series of twenty-four cut paper drawings of rocks on music sheets, titled ironically *Ode to Joy [excerpt]*, *Requiem [excerpt]*. The rocks—derived from Chinese paintings and anime—counterpose their density to the immateriality of music. The contiguous placement of the twenty-four sheets creates the expectation that they can be read as music, an expectation that is never fulfilled. The same interest in subverting the viewer's visual referents is also present in *Skin, Birds, and Stones*, two large-scale drawings of red and pink swirls that look like dizzying streams [of water, blood, air?]. Peppered with rocks—associated with urban detritus—and tiny birds, the compositions also evoke natural cataclysms, where the elements are in constant flux. However, as with most of the artist's drawings, their degree of craftsmanship, and their painstaking beauty, can serve to disguise their representational quality, an effect that the artist purposefully strives to attain.

While Fujita and Vargas Lugo share an interest in urban themes and in Asian art, their approaches are fundamentally different. In the case of Fujita, the experience of growing up in a traditional Japanese household in the midst of East L.A. has had a decisive impact. In his paintings the urban chaos of L.A. and the imaginary world of the Far East collide and somehow miraculously coexist. According to Fujita, "I kind of look at myself as a hip-hopper, the way a DJ would sample all sorts of great music from the past—sounds and beats. I'm just doing it with visuals." [9] In fact, it could be argued that the amalgam of vocabularies and styles in



Pablo Vargas Lugo, detail of *Moon Impression* (Fig. A), 2005, acrylic and fluorescent light-box, 55 1/8 x 57 7/8 x 7 7/8 in. (140 x 147 x 20 cm). © Pablo Vargas Lugo, courtesy Galería OMR, Mexico City

Fujita's work embodies the liminality of Los Angeles. A gateway to Asia and to Latin America, the city is anchored

in a multiplicity of traditions whose combination creates new ones. The bold mix of techniques, styles, and subjects results in arresting images. As the art critic Dave Hickey has pointedly stated, "Gajin has a kind of classic impure style." [10]

Vargas Lugo refers to Asian art in an oblique way. He resorts to styles and shapes that seem Asian, but which are always oddly misplaced. The lesson that the artist derives from Asian art is more related to a way of signifying space; according to the artist, "I still greatly resort to Asian art as a point of reference. I'm drawn to how in Chinese art, for example, immateriality can suggest materiality, absence can signify presence." This lesson is also tied to the way he represents the city as system of signs grounded in perceptions. As the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina has noted, the work of Vargas Lugo "offers equal dosages of the obvious and the eccentric, and creates subtle visual puns that resist critical simplification." [11]

Placing these artists in proximity calls attention to the cultural disjuncture that characterizes their work. They are not brought together to emphasize the similarity of their visual strategies, but because of the different ways in which they manipulate various visual traditions and cultural codes. In both instances, the cultural and formal overlaps result in highly alluring, often mischievous works.

Ilona Katzew

Curator of Latin American Art

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Pablo Vargas Lugo, stills from *Raid [sic]*, 2005, twin-channel video installation, 3 minutes each, © Pablo Vargas Lugo, courtesy Galería OMR, Mexico City



Pablo Vargas Lugo, detail of *Ode to Joy [excerpt]*, *Requiem [excerpt]*, 2005, paper cutouts on paper, 24 pieces, each 11 1/2 x 15 3/8 in. (29.2 x 39.1 cm), © Pablo Vargas Lugo, courtesy Galería OMR, Mexico City

1. "Pieces" refers to elaborate and complex images, while "taggings" describes the quicker, signature-style work associated with graffiti.
2. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Fujita are from conversations with the author in February 2003, February 2005, May 2005, and July 2005.
3. The tradition of *ukiyo-e*, which developed in the nineteenth-century in Japan, encompassed woodblock prints and screens that depicted the contemporary urban experience of Tokyo, including courtesans, prostitutes, and actors.
4. Vargas Lugo was part of the short-lived Temistocles 44 (1993–95), a group that rebelled against painting and the nationalistic tendencies of Mexican art. In the 1990s a number of Mexican artists (as well as foreign artists residing in Mexico) became part of the international art scene, including Francis Alÿs, Miguel

- Calderón, Gabriel Orozco, Daniela Rossell, and Santiago Sierra. For an assessment of the so-called boom of Mexican art in the 1990s, see Eduardo Pérez Soler, "Reflexivo, irónico posrelacional," *Lápiz* 173 (Madrid, 2001): 24–33. See also *Eco: arte contemporáneo mexicano*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía, Conaculta, 2005), particularly the essays by Cuauhtémoc Medina ("Notas para una estética de lo modernizado"), and Kevin Power ("Campos de minas en suelo mexicano"). See also the essays in *Exit: México* (Spain, 2005), a special issue devoted to contemporary art in Mexico.
5. Pablo Vargas Lugo, interview by Sina Najafi, 2005. I wish to thank the artist for providing a transcript. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Vargas Lugo are derived from an interview by the author on June 20, 2005.
6. On the subject of Vargas Lugo's artistic

- discourse see also the essays in *Congo Bravo: Pablo Vargas-Lugo*, exh. cat. (Mexico City: Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, 1998), particularly the one by the show's curator, Magali Arriola ("Congo Bravo o cómo escudriñar el mundo").
7. Though they are made of cut paper, the artist describes these works as drawings and distinguishes them from collage. See interview with the artist by Ichiro Irie in *Rim: Artist Rag from Mexico City and LA 4* (spring 2004), 27–28.
8. Vargas Lugo in *Congo Bravo*, 21.
9. Quoted in Scott Timberg, "Sex and the Street Tagger," *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar section, Sunday, September 1, 2002, 56.
10. *Ibid.*, 57.
11. Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Ojo Breve. La apariencia del pensar abstracto," *Reforma*, May 28, 2003, 2c.



Gajin Fujita, *Ride or Die*, 2005, spray paint, acrylic, and white gold leaf on wood panel, overall dimensions 83 x 126 in. [210.8 x 320 cm], © Gajin Fujita, courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, California



Gajin Fujita, *Study of Warrior from Shoreline Duel*, 2004, spray paint, marker, and pencil on paper, 45 x 43 1/2 in. [114.3 x 110.5 cm], private collection, Aspen, Colorado, © Gajin Fujita, courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, California

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On the cover:

Gajin Fujita, *Corp Boy*, 2004, spray paint, acrylic, and white gold leaf on wood panel, 8 x 20 in. [20.3 x 50.8 cm], collection of Alice and Nahum Lainer, © Gajin Fujita, courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, California

Pablo Vargas Lugo, *Ode to Joy [excerpt]*, *Requiem [excerpt]* (detail), 2005, paper cutouts on paper, 24 pieces, each 11 1/2 x 15 3/8 in. [29.2 x 39.1 cm], © Pablo Vargas Lugo, courtesy Galería OMR, Mexico City

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